

Teaching Classically

Phillip W. Kilgore
Hillsdale College

Phillip W. Kilgore is Director of the Barney Charter School Initiative at Hillsdale College.

The following is adapted from a speech delivered on June 15, 2016 at the opening session of teacher training for the K-2 teachers of schools affiliated with Hillsdale College's Barney Charter School Initiative.

Congratulations on a great year! 13 schools, 6,300 students, and between these three sessions of training that cover grades K-12, there are about 380 teachers coming to Hillsdale. Some of you have been out of school only a few days, so you're tired, tired from many days of teaching, tired from many evenings of class preparation. So, we want to let you rest *and* recharge.

While you are here, we want to bring your attention to the practical *and* the philosophical, to the content *and* the approach to teaching the content. You spend all year preparing, instructing, assessing, and grading, and then talking to students and parents and school leaders and colleagues about all that. When is there time to reflect? When is there time to study? When is there time to "sharpen the saw?" When is there time to revisit first things, the high and noble things, the sublime things, the things that give direction and purpose to this work that is so fatiguing? Periodically, you must have your soul lifted. You must be encouraged. You must gaze upon the beautiful. If, from time to time, you retreat from the world and feed your mind and soul, you can return to the hard task and, while growing tired, you will not lose heart. You need more than these three days to do that, but let this time be an investment in that direction. We want these three days to refresh your mind, body, and soul.

I've been to all of your schools, and probably to all of your classrooms. When I've spoken with you personally, I have heard two different questions on a regular basis. First is this: "What is the Barney Charter School Initiative? Are you from the District? What is your connection with our school?"

I think the real issue is that you're thinking this: "I'm not quite sure how to interact with you," or "Why we are talking?" or "What I should think about what you say?"

The Barney Charter School Initiative (BCSI) is an outreach program of Hillsdale College, established to promote classical education in America's public schools. We were involved significantly at the inception of all your schools, working with your school founders. Your founders came to us because they wanted our support and needed a few things:

Help in founding a school, but of a particular kind: classical

Help in implementing an established, classical academic program

Help in training the teachers

Help in staying true to a proper educational philosophy and mission

Help in advancing into excellence

And lastly, help in securing the support of a trusted organization: in short, an affiliation with the Hillsdale name

We have a written agreement, a contract with each of your schools. Essentially, it says, “If you stay true to your mission, we will continue to help.”

We are able to offer this assistance at no charge to your schools because there are many wonderful and generous Americans who have supported Hillsdale College in this venture. It makes us all friends: you, us, our donors. All so that we can educate students in the best way we know how, and through that, to help restore our country, and then ultimately, continue civilization. That may sound over the top, but we believe—and the Western tradition in history, literature, and philosophy support our belief—that civilization can be lost. So we do this work together, and it is appropriate for us to do so because we all love the same things, a set of ideas that tells us that man is a certain kind of creature, that education is a vital and noble thing, and that it must be done in a certain way because of the *kind* of creature he is.

Those are the big ideas. What about the practical issues and realities about BCSI? Well, we aren’t the district. We don’t run your school. We don’t fund your school. We do pay for these summer events, but your school paid for your travel to fly to Michigan. Instead, we are the academic advisor providing support, consultation, and resources. We offer a breadth of experience and a curricular viewpoint that is difficult for a lone school to acquire.

You might consider that this friendship and arrangement gives you a dual citizenship of sorts: You are both a teacher of your local school, and a BCSI teacher. Why should you be glad you are a BCSI teacher? *Because we are here to support you!* You don’t have to do it all yourself when you are already teaching 25 students every hour, seven hours per day. Also, there are a lot of forces trying to draw you in a different philosophical direction. We’re here to help you stay true north, to stay committed to the principles of classical education on which your schools were founded.

We are supporting schools, teachers, and school founders in this effort all across the country. In places represented by teachers in this room: Naples and Palm Bay in Florida; Savannah and Atlanta in Georgia; Bentonville, Arkansas; Lewisville, Flower Mound, Mesquite, Dallas, and Leander in Texas; Moriarty, New Mexico; Golden, Colorado; and Las Vegas, Nevada. And in places represented by our school founding efforts: Oregon, California, New Mexico, Idaho, Colorado, Texas, Alabama, Florida, South Carolina, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Washington, D.C.—and half those states have more than one active city. We believe that we are part of something significant, and that all of you are part of that, too.

The second question that I hear when I visit your classrooms is this: “Am I teaching classically?”

That's an important question, but it's an intermediate question, and the higher question helps provide the answer to it. That higher question is this: "What is a classical education and what is its purpose?" The answer can be found in a number of good sources, such as Dr. Terrence Moore's fine essay "A Classical Education for Modern Times," Robert Maynard Hutchins's *The Great Conversation*, C.S. Lewis's classic *The Abolition of Man*, and other works you have read or have heard recommended by your school principals. Quite frankly, the whole of the Western Canon engages in answering that question and related questions. Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero; Augustine, Aquinas, and Dante; Shakespeare, Locke, and Smith; Washington, Adams, and Jefferson tell us about important ideas like duty, order, friendship, self-government, and the cardinal virtues. But ultimately, our minds turn to human freedom, human flourishing, and human happiness. We must contemplate the question, "What is the good life?"

But that intermediate question, "Am I teaching classically?" is the one I am asked, and answering it is important because it is critical to the purpose of classical education. Writ large, to teach classically means guiding the *student* on a path to answer that higher question. But what does it look like?

Let me offer an incomplete list of just a few descriptions:

It is humane, because education requires both the will to teach and the will to learn; therefore teachers—not machines, textbook authors, or faraway bureaucrats—lead the students.

In the contract we have with each school board, it says that the charter schools assisted by Hillsdale College will hold fast to the following key characteristics:

- (1) The centrality of the Western tradition in the study of history, literature, philosophy, and fine arts;
- (2) A rich and recurring examination of the American literary, moral, philosophical, political, and historical traditions;
- (3) The use of explicit phonics instruction leading to reading fluency, and the use of explicit grammar instruction leading to English language mastery;
- (4) The teaching of Latin;
- (5) The acknowledgement of objective standards of correctness, logic, beauty, weightiness, and truth intrinsic to the liberal arts;
- (6) A school culture demanding moral virtue, decorum, respect, discipline, and studiousness among the students and faculty;
- (7) A curriculum that is content-rich, balanced and strong across the four core disciplines of math, science, literature, and history;
- (8) A faculty where well-educated and articulate teachers explicitly convey real knowledge to students using traditional teaching methods rather than using so-called "student-centered learning" methods;

(9) A school that uses technology effectively but without diminishing the faculty leadership that is crucial to academic achievement; and

(10) A school with a plan to serve grades K through 12, although the grades at school opening may be scaled back if reasonable.

These items inform teacher instruction. In number eight, for example, “traditional” teaching methods would not *normally* include group work, because instruction is teacher-directed.

In the classical school, teachers must possess knowledge (#8), authority (#9), and compassion (#6). These abilities allow for lessons with real weight, classrooms with order and discipline, instruction with purpose and focus. Classes are not meandering and haphazard, but conducted in a business-like manner, understanding that *every minute counts*. Teachers must take preparation seriously and be watchful in the classroom so that *all* students meet with instruction, because the teachers recognize the grand project they have undertaken.

Teachers who teach classically take responsibility for student learning in the classroom. They look for student comprehension during instruction rather than simply transmitting blindly. They don’t simply assume that the students can follow along without direction or support, but they know when and how to forge ahead. They know that their classroom isn’t a re-creation of their college experience.

Teaching classically means that teachers don’t think that instruction must be purely Socratic in every subject in every grade, but they model the virtues and habits that students will need when the proper occasion for a Socratic discussion arises. Every time the teacher enters the classroom, she has considered the purposes she wishes to achieve. Because the teacher built the lesson, the teacher knows exactly what she expects the student to know, and is therefore the best person *on the planet* to write the test or design the assignment. Also, her interaction with the students is compassionate, *not* meaning that she caters to every whimper of the struggling student, but that she does what is best for the student, and holds him to high yet reasonable expectations.

Starting there, we can continue with a few more characteristics of classical instruction, including Order and Excellence, Beauty and Wonder, Humaneness and Truth. “Humaneness” in this context means that the study of human beings and humanity are given a high and prominent place in the academic program, and that their nature informs all that goes on in both the curriculum and in the instruction. The question should be deeply considered: “What does it mean to be human?”

Now, I don’t want you to get too narrow of an idea by what I’ve said so far. Classical teaching is not frenetic or silly, but careful, thoughtful, and serious—yet not bleak or morose. Learning is fun, but it shouldn’t be a picture of frivolity. The wisdom literature of Ecclesiastes says, “To every thing there is a season, and a time for every purpose under the heaven.” Fit your activity to the proper place and season. We have playgrounds and gymnasiums and hallways and lunchrooms where important activity in the daily life of the student occurs, so I’m not referring exclusively to the classroom. And when we do get into the classroom, all instruction won’t

necessarily look alike. Nevertheless, think of your classroom as your stage and your sacred space where you have something very important to convey, and you probably won't go wrong.

We can further consider how “to every thing there is a season” in the context of student development. We give a central place in our schools to training students to strength in facility of language. We want them to read, write, listen, and comprehend with mastery, yet the development of these skills will require different approaches in different grades. Teacher-led, language-oriented instruction that includes frequent use of read-alouds is wonderful in lower elementary grades, but we must bear in mind that a first-grader can't listen to direct instruction as long as a seventh-grade student. Teaching classically gives the prominent place to language without ignoring the needs of how a young child's day must be designed. It understands the continuum that exists between a rigid, joyless, and sterile classroom on one end, and a silly, play-ridden, and vacuous classroom on the other. That concept is applicable to all grades, because there is such a thing as a silly twelfth-grade class, but it has no place in the classical school.

The classical teacher should be vigilant against activities that waste time, classroom fun or activities that are not driven by a legitimate class purpose, seeking refuge too frequently in distraction, and false gods that can cause one to lose sight of the goal and the important things. Don't let your social media habit compete with your attention on your students. Think about how much time you are in front of the classroom or walking among your students, and how much time you are at your desk when your students are still in your room. By the way, these maladies can affect not just individuals, but also institutions. From that standpoint, it is important to think about time drains, frivolity, and distraction on the school as a whole. Think about the school as a single, living organism, and apply the same principles.

When teaching classically, teachers are careful in their rhetoric and word choice. Attempt to elevate your language to be accurate, using standard English, averse of pedestrian colloquialisms, slang, and jargon.

Because, you know, guys, check it out! It's all like, well, kind of cool, and that's crazy!

To achieve beauty in language is a great challenge, but avoiding ugliness and banality is a good first step. This kind of rhetorical maturity should be accompanied by behavioral maturity. In other words, it is important to be the adult in the room, and the risk of failing at this increases with teachers of older students, often when the age gap between teacher and student decreases. Remember, while you do want to be kind, you are not the student's buddy or friend, you are his teacher, and nothing more honoring could be said of you.

I will simply summarize with this: teaching classically treats the classroom activity with an appropriate degree and mixture of richness, dignity, wonder, and love of the subject, so that those same qualities are cultivated in the student, enabling him to mature into knowledge and self-government so that, in the words of Jefferson, he may work out his own greatest happiness.